

Port Wine Stains by Gedry

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Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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Summary:

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Author's Note:

No Beta.

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Afterwards....He can't stop staring at it. The reddish purple smudge of knuckles now permanently affixed to his jaw and part of his lips.

Billy's had his fair share of bruises, burns, cuts, broken skin, road rash, split lips, dislocated and aching shoulders, fingers that he sometimes struggles to bend in the harsh winter of Indiana from too many time being slammed in drawers and doors, the twisted ankles, and occasional broken bones.

But....this.

A soul mark.

The brand of another person's touch now stamped on his face for him to witness every time he looks in the mirror.

It's described as a mark of passionate intent. Not always triggered by a first touch but by the strength of heart behind it. Billy's heard stories of soul brands occurring during the battles of war, during painful goodbyes of long time friends, in the moment of passionate sex between two lovers.

He gasps out a bitter laugh at the reflection of himself in the mirror. His fingertips tracing the mark over and over until his vision blurs with tears and Billy has to look away as he smothers a sob into his trembling hands.

It's fitting, he thinks sadly. That the mark of the person meant to share his soul, the person meant to complete his life and help make him better, would have come from a fist.

Steve Fucking Harrington.

The only blessing in all this is that soul marks are only for the bearers. Steve and Billy will be the only two people who ever see it. And fuck if Billy is going to let Steve know he gives a shit. He has bigger problems and bigger questions right now than how he's going to live the rest of his life knowing he's so broken his soulmates "passionate intent" was to hurt him.

Granted, Billy was hurting Lucas at the time. Steve had his reasons. Billy never understood until now why Steve had burrowed so far up under his skin.

But that doesn't eclipse the questions he has about what that thing in the Byers fridge was? What does that thing have to do with Max? What the actual fuck is going on in Hawkins?

Or his problems, like how is he supposed to keep an eye on Max and keep Lucas away from her when he just promised his step sister he would leave them all alone for the sake of his balls?

Problems like staying out of Neil's way, following Neil's rules, avoiding Neil's fists.

He's not good at working out problems like those. But he's got time.

Limping home, half beaten to hell, without his sister or his car resulted in some major consequences for Billy.

He wipes his eyes, blows his nose, checks his face again in the mirror.

The mark's still there...taunting him.

Billy remembers holding his mothers hand while she lay dying in the hospital, eaten away with cancer. He remembers her rubbing her knuckles on the same spot where this stupid mark now sits and whispering to him about how one day he would find the place where he belonged. Find the person he belonged with. Be safe and loved and whole.

But his mom's dead. Crying is for pussies, and Steve Harrington can fuck off.

Billy doesn't have anybody. Doesn't need anybody.

Not anymore. Not ever again.

Steve knows he's not the smartest kid in his class. It's become even more obvious since he started hanging out with thirteen year olds that know more about space time theory than his own science teacher.

Truth is, Steve brushes off how hard school is for him. How often the letters move around on his papers, making things hard to understand. How things go in and out of his head so fast sometimes that it's hard for him to think.

Nancy was dead set on him going to college.

Thank fuck Nancy is more occupied with Jonathan now. She'd missed the fact that the application deadlines slipped by as November moved into December.

Steve's not going to college. Honestly, he had no idea what he's going to do about his future, about where he's going to live, about the dark purple and red marks now permanently staining his knuckles and fingers on his right hand.

Steve had convinced himself it was a bruise until long after the marks on his face had faded into nothing. He probably would have kept right on living in the blissful denial of his current circumstances had it not been for game night at the Byers house.

Fuck if he can figure out this D & D shit. Dustin's taken him on like it's his mission in life to educate Steve on the glory and agony that comes from game play.

Mostly Steve just goes along with it so he's not alone. He spends a lot of his time alone.

More often than not now he's feeling...lonely.

A little lost and a lot lonely.

"They're out celebrating," Will mumbles when Steve asks after Nancy and Jonathan. "Some kind of anniversary."

He watches Steve with wary eyes, probably not sure about the

reaction he might get. Steve's still trying to build a relationship with the youngest Byers. After all, Will had been possessed by The Mind Flayer for most of Steve's original babysitting duties. He can't blame the kid for worrying or for wanting to protect, in some small way, his older brother.

If Steve had a brother he imagines he would feel the same way. Hell, if Steve had anyone he thinks it would apply.

"Cool," he comments back before shouldering his way past Will and further into the kitchen and announcing, "Hey Dipshits, you still owe me money for the pizza from last time!"

Will relaxes, Steve smiles. It lasts for about an hour and then Hopper shows up with Eleven in tow. Mike is ecstatic, she's all soft smiles, Hopper lets out a groan that would do any caring father proud. But then in her scan of the room the smile slides off her face when Steve slides her a cup across the table for her to snag a drink.

She grabs his hand, fingers touching so gently the soul mark he now carries. "Hurts," she whispers to him and her face looks so far away for just a moment, like she's not really there.

"No," he rushes to reassure her, he knows she shouldn't be able to see the mark. But there's always been something about her that doesn't fit the rule book that everyone else seems to have to follow. "It doesn't hurt."

"Not you," She corrects quietly, "him."

"Billy?" Steve questions and the idea that his...soulmate...is out there hurting is unsettling on a chest deep level. Even if it is King Billy Hargrove, the biggest asshole Steve has ever met in the entirety of his life.

"Hurts." She nods with finality. "Help him."

And what the hell is Steve supposed to do with that?

It's not like they don't see each other.

They do.

It's more like they see *through* each other. Or at least that's the feeling Steve thinks Billy is going for. Like Steve doesn't matter, like he doesn't even exist.

All Steve can think about is how shitty he feels that Billy's face, so frequently now marked with other unexplained bruising, will forever carry the mark of Steve's anger, fear, and ego.

Sure, Steve still has terrible headaches from the plate he took to the head and occasional blurred vision that the doctor says may never go away from the repeated blows to his face, but on the whole, he still thinks he came out better in the fight than Billy.

Billy, who used to be haunting him around every corner, digging up under his skin every time Steve took a breath. Billy who now stares at the wall behind Steve's right ear when they have to be face to face.

Billy who Steve misses, kind of, in some weird ass way that even he doesn't understand.

The truth is, Steve can admit it to himself if no one else, he's scared of Billy Hargrove.

Not like, demodog level terrified by any means. But still....

Billy hurt him. A lot. And showed every intention, by what Steve was later told, of planning to flat out beat him to death if Max hadn't stepped in.

Mind you, there are days now when Steve occasionally wonders if that would have been a bad thing. Those days are getting few and far between as the forever isolating and miserable holidays have now passed and Steve's busy trying to stop flunking out of his last year of high school. Nancy and Jonathan still trying to talk him into community college. His parents, when they're home, planning out his future working with his dad.

But Hopper, God bless that grumpy son of a bitch, finally had given Steve an opportunity to do *something* with his life that he thought he might be good at.

“My deputies are shit,” Hopper had announced after a false alarm on the supernatural had sent the whole party into high alert. “Stupid as hell and overwhelmed by all this attention.” The comment made with a disgusted hand flap at what felt like the forever expanding media attention around town. “I’m going to need help. The hours are shit, the pay is terrible, and I’m full on asshole.” He’d leveled his eyes at Steve then for what felt like a small eternity. “But I need someone who knows what’s really going on here. Your job application is clear, your background check was clean, and your references are impressive. What do you say?”

Steve smiles now, thinking back on the moment as silence had stretched between them. He’d never filled out an application. He remembers turning slowly in a circle to look at the scraggly group of younger teenagers behind him. Everyone looking everywhere but at him. Except for Dustin. That little asshole had stood there with his shoulders back and his head high. “What?” He’d commented later as Steve had driven him home, bitching about their meddling the whole way, “You’re the like my brother, Okay?” Dustin had turned as red as a beet then, “Family. I don’t have a whole lot of that. So you’re important, okay? To me. I gotta take care of you and shit. You take care of me. That’s what family does.”

He’d told Hopper yes.

Now he just has to graduate.

Steve’s so lost in the memory of being reminded how awesome his chosen family is even if his real family is gone more than here that he’s not really paying attention to where he’s walking. So, of course, because his life is occasionally shit, he walks right into Billy Hargrove.

“The fuck is wrong with you!?” Billy erupts as they slam into each other. Steve freezes, feeling planted to the ground, stuck, trapped inside himself. “HARRINGTON!” Billy bellows when Steve doesn’t move. He gives a full body twitch at that, Steve’s eyes snapping to Billy’s face and he watches as his own hand reaches up with shaking fingers to press against the soulmark on Billy’s face.

It’s almost like it’s happening to someone else. “I’m sorry,” Steve

hears himself say. He's got no idea what exactly he's sorry about.

Billy eyes go huge and his hand feels like a vice when he grabs Steve's arm and hauls him bodily into the closest room before slamming the door shut behind them both. There's this weird high pitched whining, gasping, noise and Steve just wants it to stop. Wants it all to stop before Billy does something bad to him again. Something else that can't be undone.

"Sit down," Billy orders before shoving Steve bodily into a desk chair. "Jesus, *fuck*, Harrington. Put your head between your knees or something. You have to breathe."

Then there's a rough hand on the back of Steve's neck and he's being pushed forward. It's too much. "*Don't!*" he yelps before trying to yank himself out of the other boy's grasp.

"Don't what?" Billy snaps, still shoving his head down. "Christ! You're going to pass out."

"Don't hurt me again!" Steve snarls before trying to kick himself away.

And suddenly, he's free. Billy moving into his field of vision with both his hands held up like someone's pointing a gun at him as he pales and clamps his lips together while he backs away to the other side of the room before sliding down the wall to the floor.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Billy says emphatically. "I won't touch you again. I won't even move from here. But you have to breathe, Steve. Please."

His hands stay up. Steve notices them shaking. He forces himself to inhale, watching as Billy does the same and slowly follows Billy's extended exhale like they're somehow in sync.

After three breaths the noise stops and Steve has the realization it was coming from him.

"I'm having a panic attack," he says flatly. Billy nods slowly, Steve's pretty sure Billy hasn't blinked in the last three minutes.

His face feels wet, everything hurts, he's cold. Steve hates this so much. Hates that it has to be Billy watching how weak he is.

Steve's snapped out of his thoughts by Billy moving, hands slowly going to the inside pocket of his jacket before pulling out tissues and so slowly shoving them over toward Steve.

Not close enough to touch him. Safe.

"I'm a horrible person," Billy murmurs into the silence stretching between them. "I want you to know I know that."

Steve blinks. He takes the tissues.

Billy never moves to get off the floor while Steve leaves, tissues clenched in his still trembling hand.

Billy's learned the hard way to watch people. To never be unaware of his surroundings, to never count on being safe. It's been ingrained in his head through repeated experiences where he hadn't paid enough attention and suddenly found himself bleeding or bruised.

Now, when Neil comes for Billy, he's rarely surprised. Hell, half the time Billy's been asking for it recently. It's not like he doesn't deserve it.

Not after what he did to Steve.

He's not...uncaring. Back before his life turned to utter shit and he realized he had ruined his relationship with his soulmate before it even started, Billy had occasionally allowed himself daydreams of being the kind of nurturing, supportive, empathic partner that his mother had always been. Billy had always hoped the part of him that came from her would win out in the end. Prove that he wasn't like his father.

The truth is...Billy wants to love and be loved so much it hurts.

But then there's Steve.

Steve, who fell apart after a few loud words. Steve, who cried out for Billy not to hurt him again when all Billy had been trying to do was help in his own stupid, gruff way. Steve, who Max talks about like he hung the stars and the moon. Steve, who has a bat full of nails. Steve who touched his face and whispered how sorry he was...

Steve, who Billy finds himself unable to stop watching. Billy's always been a little obsessive, but this is a whole other level. He's been trailing Steve around as much as he can for well over a week now and he's learned a number of things.

Steve is exhausted but he rarely sleeps well if the lights that stay on in his house all the time are any indication. He's eating but not enough if what the basketball coach is saying is true. His grades are climbing except for Math and English and there's some concern Steve might not graduate if those don't turn around. He's great with kids, loves animals but is allergic to most of them, and doesn't let that allergy keep him from eating dinner with Dustin Henderson and his mother once a week. Steve's compassionate, excitable, and loyal, even to those who have mistreated him...like Nancy. He's forgiving too.

Just maybe not of Billy...but it could be that Billy just can't forgive himself.

Forgiveness isn't really his area of expertise. But Math and English actually are. Billy's a good student for all his bluster. If he wasn't he got his ass beat.

Steve clearly needs help by the number of times he's torn up his paper and started over on this assignment for Math. Their free period being spent in the library with Steve doing work and Billy watching Steve.

"Do you want something, Asshole?" Steve finally questions after a number of days this week where they have repeated this dance. Billy's been biding his time. Waiting for an opening.

"You need to carry the two, Dipshit," Billy offers as a reply. "You've missed it three times now."

The glare on Steve's face is almost enough to make Billy smile. Almost.

"Fuck off," Steve grumbles. But he carries the two this time and lets out a sigh of relief when he can finally finish the equation.

Billy turns his head and lets out a quiet snort when he's proven right. People think he's dumb all the time. Billy doesn't work very hard to correct them.

"If you're going to hover you might as well sit," Steve offers, pointing at the chair across the table with his pencil. "Just keep your bullshit to a minimum. And quit staring at me."

And that...surprises Billy. Steve's more aware than he had given him credit for. He eases down into the chair as directed, only wincing slightly when the movement tugs on abraded skin and bruised muscles. When he refocuses on his...soulmate across the table Steve's eyes are narrowed and Billy wonders if maybe he hasn't been the only one watching.

"Nice haircut," Steve offers after an extended silence.

Billy can't stop his hand from rubbing the back of his head and neck where his hair used to be. He knows it's a tell. Knows that Steve catches it. "Time for a change, I guess," he ends up weakly offering as a response. "New year, new me and all that shit."

"I thought you were pretty attached to the old you," Steve challenges while he twirls his pencil in a circle across the table.

"Yeah, well, Harrington," Billy sighs "my old man decided to cut that attachment short for the both of us, you know?"

"I do now," Steve whispers, eyes gone soft and his restless fingers stilling on the tabletop.

Billy's shocked into silence by how much he's just given away. His fingers dance along the back of his now exposed neck again while he feels color rush to his face. He's never told anyone about his father. Never wanted anyone to know what happened in his home. Never wanted to be the victim.

But that's not how Steve is looking at him right now. He's looking at Billy like something he finally sort of understands. Wary, maybe, but not with the same anxiety as before.

Billy turns his eyes to the tabletop. "I'm good at Math," he offers as he tries to tug on what's left of his curls. So fucking short now, and Neil's made it clear he's not allowed to grow it back.

"I'm not," Steve snorts out a tired laugh. "What do you want?"

"Nothing," Billy snaps then closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. "I mean, I could help you."

"You...could," Steve says slowly like he's tasting the words. "Why would you?"

Billy doesn't have an answer that he's willing to give. Telling Steve that he went home the day of the panic attack and picked a fight with his father so bad he ended up with his head almost totally shaved and barely able to get out of bed to piss for three days and he stills feels like shit for what he did to Steve doesn't really seem like a good idea. Alone used to be good enough. Alone was never really lonely before this stupid mark on his face. Steve Harrington...so much temptation for things Billy knows he doesn't deserve, hasn't earned.

"I don't know," he settles on answering.

Steve stares at him for a long minute before shrugging, "Good enough for me. Just don't fuck around and tell everyone, got it?"

Billy nods. Steve slides his papers across the table using just the tips of his fingers. Billy stares, transfixed by the smudges on Steve's knuckles. Those smudges belong to him.

Even if nothing else about Steve does.

The thought spreads an odd kind of warmth through Billy's aching chest.

A month later and Billy's proud of the fact that Steve has his Math grade back under control. But as hesitantly grateful as Steve has been

for his help he has remained staunchly resistant to Billy aiding him with English.

He's been patient, and patience isn't really Billy's thing.

"Why?" Billy huffs.

"It's not your business, Dickhead," Steve almost snarls as he starts reaching for his books and ripping papers out of Billy's wandering hands.

"The fuck, Harrington!" Billy snaps, finally losing what little control he has been trying to exert over his temper. "I'm just trying to help you. You don't have to be such a pussy about it!"

Steve stills. His eyes roll to Billy's face, lip pulled back in almost a snarl. Billy expects an explosion, something violent, loud even. Anything he can work with.

They aren't friends, not really, not even close. But there's less tension between them than ever and Billy honestly doesn't know how he feels about that. But Steve doesn't say *anything* at all. He just turns and leaves Billy sitting, stunned in the library. Dismissed. Rejected. Forgotten. And so fucking cold.

He kicks the table so hard and curses so loud the librarian gives him detention. By the time he gets out to his car, Max is mad as Hell at him for making her miss the arcade. Billy grinds his teeth the whole way home while she bitches non-stop about Lucas, her friends, her fucking stupid ass skateboard. Billy yanks his car into park and throws open the door to get out with so much force the metal squeals. He's looking for a fight, fuck, he's begging for one. Storming toward the door to the house and his father beyond it like a bug attracted to light.

Max's hand on his arm causes him to jerk around with a bark of "WHAT?!"

"He told me to tell you not to do it," Max answers, her eyes wide and Billy can tell he's scaring her right now.

He breathes out slow and shaky trying to will his heart to stop

hurting, he's used to trading one pain with another and he doesn't want to feel like this anymore. "Who?" He finally asks.

"Steve," Max replies, "I didn't say anything to him, I don't know how he knows about Neil. But he stopped me on his way out of school today and told me to tell you not to do...well...this I guess. Not to pick a fight. Not to get hurt if you can help it. He said he doesn't want that."

"Who gives a shit what he wants," Is his immediate reaction. But it's instinct more than anything. Max knows it. And speaking of things Max knows.... "How do you know about Neil?"
He's tried so hard to hide it from her.

"I'm not a moron," Max says definitively. Then she walks around him into the house announcing how helpful Billy had been getting Joyce Byers car started when it's battery had been dead even though it took forever. Which never happened but Neil actually slaps him on the shoulder and tells him "Good job."

Billy's so confused he just nods along.

The phone starts ringing after nine, which is a rare thing at his house. Neil doesn't like it. There's mix of Susan, Neil, and Max arguing before his father jerks open his door and announces "Max's friend is hurt, get up and drive her to the hospital tomorrow morning so she can visit."

Billy swallows the comment about it being Saturday and that it's the one day a week where he is allowed to sleep in. He knows it won't matter. He doesn't ask which friend either, Neil won't know and would consider it backtalk. He rasps out "Yes, Sir." The door shuts and Billy remains in bed, staring at the ceiling, debating about praying to a God he doesn't believe in that the friend in the hospital isn't Steve Harrington.

It's not. But in a way it's kind of worse.

It's Dustin.

When Billy shows up, trailing behind Max in an attempt to look

uninterested, he's lost as to why this is such a big deal. The kid slipped on the ice and hit his head.

Billy's hit his head a lot in his life. He never got taken to the hospital.

"He has cleidocranial dysosto-something," Steve announces at Billy's odd look. And Steve looks like run over shit. Billy almost reaches out to him, driven by an urge to pull him close and soothe him. He doesn't though, they aren't on good terms by any shape of the imagination.

"He has what?" Billy questions wondering if this has something to do with the weird dog thing he found in the fridge.

"It's a medical thing," Steve clarifies, "I don't understand all of it but it's part of why he is missing some teeth, and his mom says it makes his skull soft or something and then he slipped and BAM. I laughed," Steve whispers the last part, his eyes welling up. "I didn't know. But then he didn't get up and now...well, here we are."

He turns away from Billy then, walks around him and out the front door of the hospital. Billy stands there, frozen in place until a girl he doesn't recognise touches his hand and whispers "Lonely."

She points to the way Steve has just gone before Hopper appears around the corner and glares living death at her. Billy actually considers stepping between them before he sees her roll her eyes and start walking away. Hopper trails behind her muttering about rules and girls that refuse to listen.

Billy follows them out in search of his soulmate.

Steve slumps on the curb under a tree near the parking lot. He watches Billy walking toward him with wary, tired eyes.

Dustin's hurt, and Steve's supposed to be responsible for Dustin, for all the kids. Shit, babysitting is what he's supposed to be *good* at.

Billy stops a foot in front of him, shifting from one foot the other, he lights a cigarette, takes a few puffs and scans the world around Steve without actually looking at him. Steve's transfixed for a moment by

how Billy sucks his bottom lip into his mouth over and over.

“Hey,” Billy mutters. Steve blinks slowly before swallowing down a high pitched giggle at how very bizarre the whole situation is. Or rather he tries to swallow it. Instead of a laugh it comes out as a snort followed by a few tears leaking out the corner of his eyes. “Hey,” he manages to choke out while Billy stares at him like he’s totally unimpressed.

“You falling apart on me, Princess?” Billy asks. But before waiting for an answer he holds out the cigarette to share and Steve doesn’t hesitate to snatch it out of his hand.

There’s another long stretch of silence where Steve smokes and Billy waits.

“He’s like my brother,” Steve finally offers. “I’m an only child and my parents are gone all the time. These kids, they’re important.” He sighs. It’s so hard to explain. “They’ve been through so much shit, more shit than you can even imagine. And last night he just...slips on some ice. Some stupid ice in the driveway and after everything we’ve been through together it’s some stupid ice that ends us up here? It doesn’t make any sense. So much shit, man. All of it could have killed him....”

Steve snaps his mouth shut so fast his teeth click together. Can’t tell Billy any of that. Can’t.

“Like the dog thing in the fridge?” Billy questions and for a moment his tone is so bland that it convinces Steve he misheard.

When he doesn’t respond Billy shifts his feet again and adds, “you know, that night, with the...” he gestures between them before waving his hand at the mark on his face.

Steve is up, grabbing Billy’s arm as hard as he can and yanking Billy behind him across the parking lot as soon as he realizes he’s not having some kind of sleep deprived hallucination. “HARRINGTON!” Billy bellows as Steve hurls him into the closest supply closet he can find and slams the door behind them.

“*Shut UP!!*” Steve snaps into the other boy’s face. “Who have you told? You shouldn’t know about that. It’s not safe. What else do you know about? You can’t say anything to anyone, Billy. Billy! Do you understand me? This could get you killed.” There’s a distant place in his head where Steve realizes how fast he’s talking, how desperate he sounds. Billy looks at him like he’s lost his mind as Steve runs his hands over Billy’s arms, chest, up his neck and across his face to his ears and down across the back of his head. It’s there that Billy finally reacts, reaching up to clasp Steve’s hands and pull them to the center of his chest.

Steve pants, on the edge of panic, as Billy rubs his fingers along the smudges on Steve’s knuckles.

“I haven’t told anyone,” Billy reassures him. “I haven’t said a word and I’m not going to say anything to anyone. I’m just...confused. I want you to explain it all to me.”

“I can’t.” It’s out of Steve’s mouth before he even thinks. So much risk and Billy isn’t exactly a confidant. Hell, they can barely stand to be in the same room together.

“You can,” Billy argues. “You will. That’s my sister in there. And you’re my...” Billy hesitates. Steve’s still close enough to him to hear the catch in the other boy’s breath before he continues. “You’re my soulmate.”

Steve’s eyes slide closed at the acknowledgement of *them*. Something warm spreading in his chest. He leans toward Billy unconsciously before catching himself. They aren’t together. This sudden sense of closeness isn’t real, hasn’t been earned. Not by either of them. “You want me to trust *you*?” he asks as he steps back.

Billy’s face flushes before he squares his shoulders and levels Steve with his gaze.

“Yes,” Billy says with more honest conviction than Steve thinks he has ever heard from him. “I told you about my dad, didn’t I?”

“You slipped and I figured it out,” Steve counters as he crosses his arms and blocks the door. The muscle in Billy’s jaw works furiously

for a minute. Steve has the control here and he knows it. Like a lightning bolt of clarity, he sees how much Billy wants to belong to something, to someone maybe, to him?

"I never told anyone about the panic attack or your shitty Math skills," Billy replies. "I haven't told anyone about the marks, or the fucked up shit at Byers house. My dad's been beating my ass for as long as I can remember and I have never told another living person about that shit my whole life. And I know, I get that you have no fucking reason to believe me and I haven't really given you any reason to think I'm any better than my dad but *fuck* how am I supposed to prove anything to you if you won't give me a chance?"

It's somehow enough, Steve nods. "Not here, and it's not just up to me."

"You have to get permission from the dipshits?" Billy sounds biting, defensive. Steve blinks when his mind produces the word afraid. He flashes back to that night at the Byers when El had whispered to him about how much Billy was hurting. Rejection is painful too. Steve hadn't thought about pain that way before.

"Yes," Steve answers. "I need to tell them about...us. I need to make sure that Dustin is ok. I need you to apologize to Lucas, and I need them to agree to what I can share."

He barely flinches when Billy kicks an empty bucket next him and make an animal noise of frustration. Billy paces the limited space of the closet before rounding on Steve with a pointed finger. Steve does him the courtesy of not commenting about the fact that it's trembling.

"We are NOT telling them about my dad."

Steve reminds himself this was all his idea when Billy sits silently glaring at him from the kitchen table at the Byers house while what feels like the whole world explodes around them both.

Thankfully, Dustin was concussed but fine. He had been discharged

from the hospital and sent home with his mother a few hours after Steve and Billy come out of the closet.

Steve really wishes Dustin was here. He could use the support and Dustin's reaction to Steve helping him to bed and giving him the quick and dirty version of this whole mess has been a hug and a quick "You do what you need to do. Tell him I'll kill him if he hurts you." When Steve had snorted in a kind of sick amusement Dustin had insisted "I raised a demodog. I'll find a way. You owe me the whole story later."

Currently, Mike is all but screaming about the intruder in their party and rules they have all broken. Hopper is snapping at Steve about why he let Dustin put a sample in the fridge in the first place. Lucas is huffing and puffing about how Billy tried to kill him. Joyce has already thrown Nancy and Jonathan out of the main area of the house until they can all calm down. Everything is negative, everything is horrible and all of it's focused on Billy. Billy, who just sits there beside his step-sister and takes it without looking away from Steve's face.

"There's got to be a way to fix it," Mike says finally.

"Fix what?" Steve snaps.

"The soulmark thing," Mike clarifies as he waves his hands between the two of them. "You can't be linked with someone like that, he's basically evil."

Billy snorts out a self deprecating laugh and Steve is thrown back to the day of his panic attack when Billy had told him *I'm a horrible person*. He snaps out of his stupor to argue because that's just going too far. But Will beats him to it.

"I've been possessed by the mindflayer," Will states in his quiet, even tones. "I spied on the party, was used by a monster to kill trick a bunch of men into being killed and sent the demodogs here to kill all of you. If Billy is evil, so am I."

"I've killed," El adds from where she stands near Mike. "I opened the gate. I've hurt people too."

Mike shakes his head. “It’s not the same.”

“He belongs to Steve,” El replies as she takes Mike’s hand. “Steve belongs to him. They help each other. It’s like us, it’s the same.”

Her look at Mike is significant and Steve watches him wilt and nod in agreement. And....shit. Their relationship makes a lot more sense now.

“Soulmates?!” Hopper roars over Steve and Billy’s head at the other, younger, couple. “You’re fucking kids!”

And suddenly, Billy’s not the topic up for debate anymore. The party moves on to more parental concerns and Steve and Billy are left sitting at the table all alone while everyone else wanders, arguing, into the living room.

Billy offers a shaky grin, Steve laughs and kicks at him under the table.

“Is it always like this?” Billy asks after they finish scuffling.

“Yeah,” Steve answers, easing back into his chair with a contented smile “It kinda is, but occasionally with demodogs.”

Billy nods his head slowly with his fingers tip tapping on the table. “I have to take Max home soon.”

“Can you meet me tomorrow?” Steve asks.

“Can’t stand to be away from me or something?” And for just a split second Steve thinks he might understand what it feels like to have Billy Hargrove flirt with him. He swallows and tries to will away the blush he can feel spreading across his neck.

“My parents are gone,” Steve replies instead of answering. “Again...It would be private and I’m assuming that at end of all this shit tonight you’ll be part of the party.”

“This is the lamest party I have ever been to,” Billy sighs as he shoves himself back from the table and gets to his feet. Steve watches him flip Max’s hair on his way out the door and waves goodbye to Max as

she grabs her stuff to follow.

He drives himself home that night much later than when Billy had left. Sleep is slow to come to him which is normal for Steve now. But for the two hours of sleep he manages, more than his usual, his dreams are blissfully free of demons.

“Harrington,” Billy announces instead of saying hello when Steve opens his front door the next morning, “You look like you need a pool full of coffee.”

It’s not even an understatement. Steve Harrington looks like death after a three week bender.

“Good morning to you too,” Steve snorts before shuffling away from the door, leaving it open for Billy to follow. Billy hesitates before stepping across the threshold. Something feeling like having this conversation is going to change everything in his life. After a minute he shrugs, steps inside and shuts the door behind him.

It’s not like Billy is overly attached to much of his current life anyway.

An hour later and Steve’s still talking. Rapid fire information coming at Billy from all sides about a place called The Upside Down, giant mouthy assholes called demogorgons, the larger version of that thing in the fridge, and The Mind Flayer, the gate being closed, who that El girl really is. Billy’s a little overwhelmed by it all but he’s only asked a few questions because as he’s been talking Steve has looked more and more healthy.

And healthy Steve is....animated, uplifting, and attractive.

Billy’s horrified by what’s been going on in Hawkins lab, sickened by Steve’s brief description of Eleven’s life, and he’s going to give that damn kid a hug later, Billy empathizes with growing up manipulated by an abusive father. But other than that, he’s actually having kind of a good time. Steve’s rambled through each members role in the party, what makes each individual kid special and amazing, and is clearly

trying to impart to Billy why he should want to be part of Steve's cobbled together little family.

Which to Billy translates into knowing that at least on some level Steve wants to keep him. And ain't that a novelty?

By the time Steve slows down Billy's been watching Steve's hands flap around and his body shift back and forth for so long he's starting to get why Steve has a hard time planting his feet. "Lunch?" Billy suggests when Steve takes a pause and before the other boy can answer Steve's stomach growls so loudly Billy can hear it across the couch.

"That's all you have to say after all that?" Steve looks mystified. "I thought you would have more questions."

"After," Billy assures him and pats the other boy on the shoulder before wandering off into the house looking for the kitchen and beginning to dig through the cabinets and pantry for options. He grins to himself as Steve follows him in and jumps up to sit on the counter.

"You cook?" Steve asks when Billy starts pulling out pots. "I was just going to reheat something."

"I can slap some stuff together," Billy shrugs. It's not exactly true. Billy's a more than capable cook and Steve has enough stuff in his cabinets for homemade spaghetti. "It's not much."

"It's way more than I usually get," Steve snorts. And there's a story there.

Billy raises an eyebrow and that's all it takes.

"My parents are never here," Steve starts as he knocks his feet against the cabinet doors. "But neither of them really cook anyway. We order out a lot or eat stuff out of the microwave. When they're gone I kinda live off leftovers or stuff I pick up coming home from school. But I never learned to cook. Not that there was anyone here to teach me."

"You eat at the Henderson's house," Billy offers as he stirs and maybe he's a little too comfortable because he sees Steve still out of the

corner of his eye.

“You stalking me Hargrove?”

Billy feels his stomach flip over, his muscle clench, waiting for the confrontation when he turns to really look at Steve. But the other boy is smiling shyly. Steve’s eyes glinting in the early afternoon light. “Someone should be,” Billy says as he turns back to the stove. “You need looking after.”

They don’t say much for a while, Steve asking occasional questions about what Billy is cooking and Billy explaining his theory on cooking. He’s ridiculously pleased by the noises Steve makes as he tucks into the food.

Billy Hargrove, provider. He’s embarrassed by how good the thought makes him feel.

“So,” Steve starts after they wash the dishes. “You said questions after lunch...”

“Yep,” Billy agrees before settling back onto the sofa. “Ready?”

When Steve nods his agreement, going so far as to stretch out his feet across the cushions toward Billy, he takes a deep breath before starting with “Why won’t you let me help you with English?”

Steve stares at him completely blank for a long moment before throwing his head back and laughing long and hard. Billy grins as his eyes trail down the mole dotted expanse of Steve’s throat.

“Everything I told you and *that* is what you want to know? Jesus.” Steve huffs. When Billy doesn’t add anything else Steve flushes and finally replies, “I have a hard time understanding what I’m reading. The letters, like, move around on me. It’s stupid. Look...Billy...I’m not that smart.” His left shoulder lifts like it’s not a big deal but his legs start curling up toward himself, clearly uncomfortable.

“Bullshit, Harrington,” Billy argues with a sharp shake of his head, “How come nobody knows about this?”

Steve has the decency to flush. “I had help, lots of help from my girlfriends...and my teachers were...flexible. Between my dad’s

money and my ummm....charm? I didn't have a lot of problems until last year. But then...with everything that happened. I don't want to be that asshole anymore. I want to actually earn this. It's important to me. I just can't focus." Steve rolls his eyes and drops his head against the arm of the couch.

"What if I read to you?" Billy offers and ignores the wild eyes that Steve rolls toward him. He knows it sounds weird. "My mother." Billy offers as an olive branch. "She's dead. But when she was alive she used to say the same thing to me, about the letters moving. I used to read to her and when I did she could remember so much of what I read. She said it helped. I just thought maybe it could help you too."

Steve takes a slow exhale. Billy focuses on the silence in the house as he waits. There's a car going by in the distance. "Okay," Steve agrees. "Thank you."

And then he yawns, this huge jaw breaking thing that make Billy worry for a second his face might crack.

"Tired?" Billy asks, even though he knows Steve is. Honestly, had fed him a butt ton of spaghetti hoping to get him to relax a little bit. If he's being totally transparent, even if it is just to himself, Billy was hoping he might be able to get Steve to nap, might be able to hold him or something.

Admittedly, it's a half formed plan. Just being there, alone, with his soulmate is better than Billy ever thought he might have.

"I don't sleep much," Steve sighs. "Nightmares."

Billy nods, "me too, but for different reasons. You should rest," Billy suggests. "I'll be right here."

"Hargrove," Steve snorts. "You are NOT getting into my bedroom or my pants that easily."

They both laugh, and for a second it seems easy, natural, to be this way together. Billy hopes against his better judgement that he might get to keep this, at least for a while.

"Just the couch," Billy assures him, grabbing the pillow stuffed into

the chair next to the couch and fluffing it in his lap with an exaggerated wiggle of his eyebrows. “Just us, right here. No games.”

Steve looks skeptical but another yawn rocks his body and he seems to melt across the couch toward Billy until his head lands on the pillow now in Billy’s lap. “Just for a few minutes,” Steve points to him and then says more softly. “Please don’t leave.”

“I won’t.” Billy’s dragging the blanket from the back of the couch to cover the other boy as Steve relaxes slowly, what feels like one tense muscle at a time. “I’m right here,” Billy whispers.

Steve snores. Billy doesn’t mind. He spends the next two hours listening to the quiet of the Harrington house and running his fingers through his soulmates hair.

It’s as close to coming home as Billy has felt since his mother died.

Steve’s not entirely sure what he thought having a soulmate was supposed to be like. But he’s pretty sure there’s supposed to be sex. Or something. A kiss maybe?

Fuck if he knows. Nothing in his life ever turns out the way he thought it would be.

Billy’s been making time, when he can, to help Steve with his English work and honestly after the first few really embarrassing sessions of being read to Steve’s seeing the benefits of Billy’s idea. His grades are improving significantly and he’s not nearly as lost in class as he used to be.

It’s not perfect by any means. Their relationship is often tense, sometimes stupidly complicated, and Billy has been more than resistant to Steve’s questions and concerns regarding Billy’s home life. It’s led to some serious arguments. Both of them shouting at each other and storming away. Billy sometimes coming back with busted lips or limping. Steve finally losing his temper all together during one of their bouts and accuses Billy of picking fights with his dad on purpose just to make Steve pity him.

It's a terrible thing to say, Steve's eaten alive with the guilt of it for the week they don't speak after. Billy finally coming to him just before the school bell rings to start the day and whispering "I don't do that. Not to make you feel bad, not to hurt you."

He walks away without another word and Steve doesn't mention it again.

There's a lot they don't talk about. Like what the soul marks mean, what they are to each other, where this whole undefined thing is going. It's frustrating for Steve because he used to be the man with a plan and now he's got his whole other thing going on with his used to be enemy and Steve doesn't even really know if he likes guys, much less Billy in a...romantic way?

Do guys do that with each other? Not the whole sex thing, Steve knows about that part, sorta, but the dating, relationship thing.

Hawkins, Indiana isn't exactly the open minded cultural epicenter of the United States and damn if Steve is driving to the town library to look up *that*.

But still, he wonders and he wonders if Billy wonders or if Billy *knows* about two men together. But Steve's not asking him either because there's already enough of their thing they don't talk about.

Thinking about it gives him a headache. Trying not to think about it gives him a headache too.

Watching all the girls flirt with his soulmate gives him a different kind of headache. So far Billy hasn't taken any of them up on their offers, as far as Steve knows. But there's no clear understand about other people and their not relationship either. Steve's been working up the nerve to ask about the whole mess when something unexpected and unwelcome cuts that all off at the pass.

Billy meets Steve's father. Which on the table doesn't sound like a bad thing, it's not like Steve's parents are invested in his life that much.

Except for the day in question when Billy's turned on the charm and

Steve's dad seems determined to at least appear like an actual parent instead of a workaholic who occasionally remembers he has a son.

"You're in Steven's classes?" His dad questions. And at Billy's affirmative launches into his opinions of the school system as a whole, the teaching staffs grading system, and their basketball coaches relationship issues. Steve tunes him out almost totally. This has been going on for what feels like a half hour and Steve still has homework to finish. Billy's playing the super nice houseguest and Steve's just weirded out by the whole damn thing. Then it happens.

"Do you know the boy who attacked him last fall?" Steve's father questions and that's...odd. Steve and his dad never said word to each other about that. His mom had driven him to the doctor.

Billy blinks, Steve starts holding his breath. The lack of response does nothing to stop Steve's father. "Of course you do. This is a small town. Steven won't tell us who it was and I'm assuming he told you not to tell me either. But that kid is a menace. He should have been prosecuted. Between the headaches and the vision problems Steven has had since then it's a miracle his grades aren't in worse shape than they actually are. I appreciate you being willing to tutor him."

"Tutor him." Billy flatly repeats. "Headaches and vision problems."

"That little bastard ruined him for life," Steve's dad announces with finality. "Just, watch out for him, would you?"

He doesn't wait for Billy to respond, which, is in some small way a blessing. He goes to pour himself a drink in the lounge and leaves Billy looking gutted, ruined at the dining room table with Steve's text books spread out between them.

The silence is deafening. Steve watches Billy's face turn so red he looks like he's on fire and flinches at the tear that rolls down out of Billy's left eye. "I have to go." Billy announces and it sounds to Steve like he means he has to go forever. Like, in the never coming back way.

"Don't," Steve breathes out. "It's not that bad. Not like he makes it sound."

Billy makes a strangled noise as he grabs his jacket and slams out the door. He doesn't look back even as he peels the Camaro out of the driveway.

Steve does the only thing he can do. He gets his keys and heads to Dustin's house.

If he's going to have a breakdown he's going to do it with his brother.

Billy handles his guilt in the way that he has historically handled all things full of emotional discomfort...he gets roaring drunk.

Once there, it seems like a totally logical process to go and turn himself in. The words from Steve's dad rolling around in his head over and over. Billy needs to be punished and barring going home and allowing his father to spend another night slowly turning Billy into himself it's the only thing he comes up with.

He just hurts so damn much.

Hopper is...less than impressed with his idea. "What the shit are you talking about, Hargrove?"

Billy takes a shaky breath and starts again. He's stumbling around it at first...disturbed by the swell of emotion that makes tears prick at his eyes. "I hurt him," he tries. "Bad. I mean I'm bad and I hurt him and now he's....hurt and...confused and we're soulmates and so he thinks I'm NOT horrible. But it's just the stupid soulmate link that makes him think that and he's wrong. His dad said I gave him brain damage and I need you to press charges. Make it stop, please."

Hopper's a hard man to read, even for Billy who is willing to brag about his people skills. There's a long beat of silence and then the Chief is grabbing his hat and his keys and shoving Billy out towards his jeep. Billy stumbles along with him.

They end up at the diner with Hopper pumping Billy full of coffee. "You sober yet, kid?"

"Good enough," Billy grumbles. He's tried to leave three times and

Hopper's made it clear he's not letting him go anywhere.

"First," Hopper starts as he swipes his hand down his face. "Steve Harrington wasn't any more brain damaged after the fight with you than he was before it started." When Billy opens his mouth to argue he blasts on, "No! I saw the medical report. You gave him a hell of a concussion with that plate to the head. But that's all it was. He had a couple of weeks of bad headaches and some vision stuff but last time I talked to him that had all cleared up. I don't care what his father told you, but that those parents of his are gone so much I bet they can't even remember his middle name. I'm not locking you up and if you feel like shit about the fight just go and apologize for Christ sake."

Billy opens his mouth, then shuts it, then opens it again. It's all just kind of a blank.

"And I have no idea what you think being someone's soulmate is, but that link between the two of you doesn't make him overlook your personal flaws."

"You don't know that," Billy snorts.

"Yeah, I do. You little shit." Hopper huffs. "My wife and I were soulmates. She gave me shit for every second of every day of our time together. Drove me crazy. I loved it. After our daughter died....I checked out. And then, eventually, so did she. She packed up and left me. Soulmark or no soulmark they don't make you overlook a box full of bullshit. See? Here I am."

It's a lot to process. Billy stares out the window for a long time. Until Hopper throws a few bills on the tabletop and pick up his hat.

"Get your shit together, Hargrove. Don't make the same mistakes I did. Let it go, get over yourself and go home."

"There's nothing for me there," BILLY sighs. Defiant even in the face of what he knows is right.

"Home ain't a house, kid," Hopper snorts. "It's where your safe and content. If you're lucky it's where you're happy. The rest of your life

is waiting on you to decide what you want. Don't fuck it up." He leaves.

Billy goes through three more refills on his coffee before noticing the sign in the window about them having a cooking position open. He asks to talk to the manager. Billy Hargrove knows for sure he is good at two things...fucking up his life and cooking.

Time to start focusing on the cooking.

Maybe he can try to work out the rest of his shit while he cooks.

Steve wakes up Sunday morning on the bottom of a dog pile of kids barely old enough to be teens. He's warm, feels loved, and hates that the first thing he thinks about is that Billy's not there with him. He's not sure when Billy Fucking Hargrove became one of the most important things in his life. Fuck it.

Dustin is drooling a puddle next to Steve's face and it's gross and endearing. Will is flopped over Mike and Lucas has shoved himself completely around so it's just his feet jammed up under Steve's totally numb thigh.

He's got to piss.

There's shoving, some tugging, and finally he manages to pry himself loose.

Steve limps his way to the bathroom and back. He's smiling at the pile of kids on the floor with this dumb ass look on his face when he realizes it's been a week since he seen his soulmate, Billy is somehow managing to dodge him at school if he's even going, and this is the first time he hasn't felt like sleeping was a waste and being awake was worse.

It's the not knowing that's the terrible part. Is he ok? Is he coming back? Did he do something stupid? Is he hurt?

So many questions. No answers in sight.

Steve huffs, grabs his keys and heads to the diner on the edge of town. The kids need breakfast, they eat like trucks, and Steve can't cook.

He's got the windows rolled down as he drives, enjoying the spring air, all crisp and clean. Feels almost like starting over.

Steve's humming along to the music as he rounds the corner into the diner and parks his car. He holds the door open for this little old lady he thinks he remembers from way back when he used to go to church and offers her a classic Steve Harrington smile. She titters as she shuffles away and he turns toward the counter determined to pick up whatever kind of breakfast pastry, bread item, or Hell...pie that they have to offer. Pie for breakfast is good. Steve's not their parent, he can let them have pie. He's stumbling through cobbling together his to go order when his soulmate walks out of the kitchen without looking up and tells the very grumpy looking woman taking Steve's order "Beverly, I'm off. I'm due back on Monday night but send someone for me if you need help."

Steve's so stunned he doesn't make a sound. Not a peep. And just like that Billy's gone out the front door with a rag stuffed into the back of his pants, apron hanging off his shoulder. Steve watches, stunned, as Billy walks through the parking lot and takes off down the sidewalk on foot.

"Honey," Beverly announces with a snort, "You gotta pay for the pie. After that why don't you go on after him while I pack up your order. It'll take me awhile to get it all together."

"What?" Steve stammers as he shoves a handful of bills across the counter into her hand.

"He's yours," Beverly smiles then, the few missing teeth making her a bit more creepy than maternal. "I can see it." She touches her face where Billy's mark would be. "It's rare, but it happens. Y'all got a lot to work out, but that boy is pining for you something bad. Don't keep him waiting."

Steve doesn't even wait for his change.

“Billy!” he shouts as he all but sprints down the sidewalk. “*BILLY!!*”

His soulmate turns around so slowly Steve skids to stop a few feet away suddenly nervous about what’s about to happen.

Billy holds up his hand to shade his eyes from the morning sun and asks, “What the fuck is going on with your hair, Harrington?”

Steve reaches up to take stock of what he is sure is a mess on autopilot. He honestly has no idea what he looks like right now. “Why are you walking?”

Billy’s grin spreads across his face as slow as molasses. “I asked you first.”

Steve rolls his eyes, “I don’t give a shit about my hair, Billy.”

Billy nods, a look of consideration on his face. “I sold my car.”

“Why?” Steve’s so shocked he creeps a couple of steps closer without really being aware of it, like being drawn to a magnet. “You love that car.”

“I don’t give a shit about my car, Steve.” Billy shrugs.

They both shift their feet looking at the ground.

“We need to talk,” They both blurt at the same time. Steve blushes. He can’t really see if Billy does, the sun’s too bright.

“Come to my place,” Billy offers with a wave behind himself down the street.

“That’s not the way to your house,” Steve comments as he leans around Billy’s form to peer down the road.

“I sold my car,” Billy repeats. “I’m 18 now, my birthday was this week. I sold my car, got a job at the diner, used the money to rent what is probably the shittiest apartment ever over top of Beverly’s garage. But it’s mine. Come to my place. Come home with me and let’s....talk..finally. I’m not good at it, but I have so much to say to you. I’ll try.”

"I have to take breakfast to the dipshits," Steve blurts and rushes on with the rest when he sees the look of disappointment on the other boys face. "Shit! No! I mean I need to take them breakfast and then I'll come back. I left them sleeping and they'll be worried. I want to come home with you. Maybe we both suck at this talking thing."

Billy lets out a lung full of air in a choked off laugh. "Yeah. Look, I gotta shower. I smell like grease. Take the little herd of assholes their food and then come to my place. It's a half a block down the next left, bright blue shutters. The place looks like a fun house. The steps up to the apartment are on the backside of the garage. I'll leave the place open for you. Wake me up if I'm napping. I work the night shift."

Steve nods, turning back toward the diner, the food, his car.

"Harrington," Billy blurts when Steve is only a few steps away.
"You're coming, right?"

Steve nods, smiling, as he rushes away. He's suddenly in a hurry.

Billy watches Steve until his soulmate is out of sight. Then he turns on his heels and runs home. He stinks, his apartment is a mess, and he's got no idea what to say to Steve when he finally shows up. Winging it has worked out pretty well for Billy so far this week though so he's going with the flow.

He rushes around the apartment picking up trash and rushing it to the curb, throwing the few dishes he has into the busted up cabinet over the sink and letting loose a stream of curses when he can't find the top sheet to the bed set Beverly gave him when he moved in.

Steve's going to think he's a fucking slob. Jesus.

Billy multitasks his way through cleaning the bathroom, doing it while he showers and hey, the grout is actually white, not grey, who knew. He tries on three pairs of jeans before remembering that Steve has seen him in literally every single outfit he owns at least once already and gives up, pulling on pajama pants and a threadbare t-

shirt. His feet are bare and for some reason that bothers him but he'd look stupid as shit in boots and pajama pants and there is no way he is wandering around in just his socks.

It occurs to him after he's moved the couch to the third different position in the room that he's a mess. Billy sits down, thinks about a beer, dismisses the idea totally. He's not doing that anymore. He can deal with his fucking feelings.

Really, he can. He *can*.

Billy sits down. Leans back on the couch and stares at the ceiling while he waits. He's asleep before he knows it.

He wakes up with a start when the door clicks shut behind Steve who smiles shakily, like maybe he's just as nervous as Billy feels right now.

"You're right," Steve comments as he looks around. "It's a shit hole."

Billy hits him with a cushion.

Steve laughs as he eases his way into Billy's new....home. He'd never thought about it that way before.

His home. That's amazing.

"Dipshits doing ok?" Billy asks because he still isn't sure what to say to Steve now that he has him here. The kids are always a sure fire way to get Steve's mouth going and maybe it will buy Billy some time.

"They think I'm insane for coming here." Steve states as he points to the other side of the couch and Billy scrambles over to make him some room. "The party is pretty torn about you right now. Max, El, and Dustin have been your staunch defenders through all this. Will's on the fence, and Lucas and Mike want to revoke your place in the party."

"What about Nancy and Jonathan?" Billy hates himself for asking. But the hot flare of jealousy that burns in his chest won't allow him to move on until he knows. Steve might be his soulmate, but he's not

Billy's...well anything right now.

Steve snorts while he rests his head on the back of the couch and closes his eyes. "They don't get a vote."

His eyes open and he turns his head enough for Billy to make eye contact with him. "Billy, why do you want to know?"

Billy has a moment of struggling, trying to not give into the age old need he has had to be self protective, to brush it all away. But he doesn't want to do that anymore. Not to Steve. "I'm jealous," he starts and then almost laughs at how wide Steve's eyes get. "You were with Nancy and I'm not blind or stupid. Jonathan ain't hard on the eyes or anything. You guys have this history, the three of you. And you and me...we aren't really together..."

"Do you want to be?" Steve questions.

"Do you?"

"I asked you first," and Billy rolls his eyes and bites his lips.

"Maybe?" He offers hesitantly.

"You aren't sure?" Steve barks and Billy's pretty sure he's going to combust by how stupid and weird this all is.

"Are you?" Billy asks.

And Steve erupts with "GOD DAMMIT, BILLY!" Jumping off the couch to pace back and forth in the tiny space of the living room. "What do you want? I can't stand this! What are we? Are we friends? Are you my..boyfriend? Do you want to kiss me? Fuck me? Hold my hand? Cuddle me? Are you interested in me at all?"

He's beautiful when he's ranting, Billy thinks, distracted and it takes him too long to answer. It's suddenly clear Steve is waiting by the silence that feels oppressive. "Ummm, yes?"

Steve blinks, "Jesus Christ, Hargrove. You really do suck at this."

He flops back down on the couch a little closer to Billy this time and

swipes a hand over his face. Then he chuckles and so help him, Billy can't help it. He bursts out laughing and is wiping tears from his eyes by the time he and Steve have themselves under control.

Then he takes a deep breath and reaches over to take his soulmates hand. Steve stares at their hands, both of them watching as they slowly slot their fingers together. "We're friends," Billy almost whispers, his voice rough and low. "At least that. I want to get to know you. I want you to really know me. I want to hold your hand. Hell, I want to hold you and be held by you in general. Everything from going to bed together at night to holding your precious hair back when you puke." He pauses at Steve's huff of laughter.

"I don't want to be with anyone but you and I don't want you to be with anyone but me. I've been worried off and on for a while now you're going to move on to someone else, someone easier to be with, someone better than me. I do want to kiss you...most of the time if I'm being honest. But I haven't because I know me. I use sex to feel close to people even though it's not real. I use it to meet my needs and then it's done and I run. I don't want that with you. I'm so interested in you I can't stand myself. But if I kiss you, I'm not going to stop...and we both deserve more than that, I think. So if you're okay with that, I want to wait."

"Wait until what?" Steve whispers.

"Until you know enough of me to decide if you want to keep me forever," Billy breathes out. "Until you're sure about me. Until then I'm going to let you lead the way, okay? My way is a mess and I don't know what I'm doing here. But, I'm trying to be a better person and I don't want you to be scared of me."

"Billy," Steve huffs. "I haven't been scared of you since you started helping me with Math."

"I hurt you," Billy interrupts.

Steve nods, "You did. But my dad's an idiot. I had headaches and blurred vision but that stopped a long time ago."

"Hopper told me that. He said you aren't any more brain damaged

than you were before I hit you.”

Steve sighs like an overworked stay at home mom. “That guy is such an asshole.”

Billy tugs him in closer to his chest and feels what seems like a lifetime of stress pour out of his soul. “You staying?” Billy whispers into Steve’s hair.

“Yeah,” Steve agrees. “This is where I want to be.”

Billy Hargrove....is actually...a pretty wonderful boyfriend.

Steve is going to be able to call him that in his head without blushing eventually. Maybe.

Despite the ban on kissing. Steve respects it as much as he hates it. When he’s totally honest with himself he knows that kissing Billy Hargrove quickly turns into putting his mouth other places on Billy Hargrove even in his own mind....and that’s just what Steve wants. Forget what Billy might be thinking about.

Cold showers sometimes help. Sometimes they don’t.

Steve’s had many nights alone in his bed with his hand. Stroking himself with Billy’s name on his lips as he comes. More and more often giving into the urges he has to turn over and thrust into his sheets while he shakily, tentatively, reaches around to rub a fingertip again his ass imagining it’s Billy there, getting him ready. Fuck, it makes him come so hard.

He’s grown enough to admit that the lack of sex isn’t going to kill either of them and young enough to really, really want to fuck. It’s frustrating.

Otherwise, they’ve been talking. More than Steve had ever thought they could.

He’s told Billy about how lonely he had been feeling, how out of place and confused he always felt like he was and his own ways of

covering up his insecurities. Billy had listened, asked questions, given feedback, and in general helped Steve to feel heard and important.

Really important, *wanted* and not just in a sexual way. Billy lights up whenever Steve is around and it's great.

And Billy, Hell, Billy has told Steve everything.

School is over, graduation accomplished, and he started his first full shift at the Sheriff's office on a few weeks back. Steve has been planning. He's told his parents about not going to college, already asked Beverly if she minds if he moves in with Billy. Beverly laughed in his face about the key and then walked in the back and came back out with one for Steve.

He still hasn't told Billy. There's something really warm and sweet about Billy letting him in every time he visits. Steve should have known better than to try and hide it.

"Hey, Princess," Billy shouts as he digs through Steve's car for the next load of Steve's stuff that they have been slowly moving over even though Steve has been spending most of his nights at the apartment for a while now. "Open the door."

"It's locked!" Steve shouts back down the stairs.

"Use your key," Billy answers.

Steve rolls his eyes. "Who told you?" But, he unlocks the door just the same, even holding the door open for Billy as he comes by with the boxes.

Billy drops a kiss only Steve's forehead as he goes by. "Nobody, you just keep looking at the door and smiling that stupid girly smile you get sometimes."

"You love my girly smile," Steve argues as he tries to trip Billy from behind.

"Fuck, yeah I do," Billy winks as he drops the boxes in the bedroom.

Billy looks lighter than Steve can ever remember him. He

looks...loved. And he is, even though Steve hasn't told him how loved he is yet. Maybe Billy's not ready to hear it. Either way they try their best to show each other every chance they get.

Hence the pie packed into the Steve lunch three times a week.

Billy is an excellent cook. Beverly has been trying to get Billy to move to day shift but he has flat out refused. Steve's got the night shift as a deputy and Billy doesn't want to give up any more time with him. The added benefit is that the job came with agency car so Billy can drive Steve's while Steve secretly saves money so he can buy back the Camaro. Billy really loved that car.

They still ride to work together. Steve drops Billy off on his way in and picks him up when his shift is over, them riding home together as dawn breaks over the horizon. The CB radio in Steve's car goes off as they pull into the driveway behind the apartment one morning.

"Steve," Eleven's voice coming through slightly staticy. "How do you spell daiquiri?"

Steve's eyes widen, because why does fourteen year old need to know that? He bats Billy's hand away from the radio and picks it up to say "You're not old enough to know that."

"Steeeeeveee," Elven answers in the tone of all young teenagers who are not being given their way. Billy snorts and Steve rolls his eyes.

"Fine," Steve huffs "Ummmm, I'm not sure. D-A-C-R-E?"

Billy barks out a laugh before leaning across the seat to press the button again and correcting with "D-A-I-Q-U-I-R-I, Kiddo."

There's a beat of silence before El replies, "Steve's way is better."

Billy smiles, that wide unguarded smile that Steve's been seeing more and more. He presses the button again and says softly "Yeah, it usually is."

He keeps Steve's hand as he hangs the cb back on in its place before turning Steve's hand over and rubbing the mark across Steve's fingers along the marks on his lips in a slow and tender caress.

Steve feels the air shift around them. "Billy," he whispers. Waiting

until he has his soulmates full attention. “I love you. Take me inside and kiss me.”

“Is that all?” Billy questions and his tongue brushes over the backs of Steve’s fingers while Steve feels himself start to breathe harder.

“Not if you don’t want it to be,” Steve answers.

“Oh,” Billy huffs as he turns and digs out his keys before opening the car door. “I want. Lead on, Princess.”

And so, Steve does.

Author's Note:

This is my first work with these characters and I feel like I'm still getting my footing.

I felt like I could have kept going on this forever. I know, they never even got to the kiss. But I wanted to put this out there to see if people liked it and thought I could maybe write a more physically intimate sequel if there was any interest.

Thank you so much for reading!